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AUTHOR Runciman, Lex
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ABSTRACT

What happens in a writing center is always directly linked to a particular curriculum. If the "old regime" featured a 2-course writing requirement, the writing center director generally teaches in the English department and the center works closely to support composition and technical writing and advanced composition sections. Student writers may make repeated use of the center while enrolled in those writing/English courses, but a relatively small percentage think of the center later when faced with term papers or reports in other courses. In the case of curriculum reform, writing receives a different focus. As a result of the new curriculum, more teachers and more students will be more involved with writing. Questions which come up can be divided into "Practical Questions" and "Role Questions." For example, what services will define the writing center's relation to student writers? Will the writing center play a part in faculty development workshops or seminars? Is the writing center space large enough to handle increased demand, and is it adequately furnished? What unites the questions is the role of partnership. In the best of all worlds, the writing center is a major factor, extending its partnerships with students and faculty in ever greater directions and in ever greater numbers. (NKA)

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What General Education Reform Does to Writing Programs
Lex Runciman, Linfield College, McMinnville, OR 97128

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"When General Education Reforms Include Writing, What Happens to the Writing Center?"

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First premise: though we might not often think about it, what happens in a writing center is always directly linked to a particular curriculum. Change that curriculum, and it's inevitable that the writing center will change too. In fact, how the writing center will change--what it should do or not do, and so on--these issues need to be part of the discussion about curriculum right from the beginning. What follows is really the briefest sketch of the kinds of questions that ought to arise whenever general education reforms extend writing to more faculty and more students. Having said that, it may not be entirely foolish to outline a generic before-and-after scenario to ground this discussion.

BEFORE

So for purposes of illustration, let's start by assuming that the old regime featured a two-course writing requirement: first year composition followed at the sophomore or junior level by either

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technical writing or advanced composition--with all of these taught in the English department. Let us further assume that other courses on campus used writing or not, but these courses carried no special designation nor were their teachers offered any particular encouragement or support. Let's assume a writing center exists in some form, that it's open 20 hours a week and staffed almost entirely by student English majors. Perhaps it is housed near the English department, perhaps near the library, perhaps with the steam pipes in the basement of the old social sciences building. The writing center director teaches in the English department (perhaps in a tenure line position, perhaps not) and gets release time for that responsibility.

Given these curricular conditions, the writing center works closely to support composition and those technical writing and advanced composition sections. It may go so far as to request course information and assignments from that relatively small number of teachers. For other faculty, the writing center remains somewhat mysterious and peripheral, often despite concerted efforts to publicize its existence and functions. As for student writers, they may make repeated use of the writing center while enrolled in those writing/English courses, but a relatively small percentage think of the writing center later when faced with term papers or reports in other courses. The frequency of student writing practice is uneven; some students claim they can go a year or more without doing any substantial writing in any course.

AFTER

Assume now that the discussion about curriculum reform has taken over a year, and some of this discussion has focused on what it means to require writing, what it means to teach it, and (especially) who ought to be responsible for it. Some faculty continue to see writing as a matter of either native talent or inoculation (more often an inoculation that doesn't readily take), but many others realize that writing is a practice before it is a product, that it relies on a complicated set of habits of mind, that it can be very particular to individual contexts, that writing frequently improves one's efficiency and success, and that writing can act to provoke learning as well as function to communicate that learning. Perhaps most importantly, more faculty are now willing to use more writing in their courses, and they have ratified that willingness by collectively agreeing to identify and require writing intensive courses across many disciplines. Perhaps they have also agreed to supplement or replace first year composition (formerly taught exclusively in English) with a course called something like "Writing Seminar," a course that, given a willingness to abide by certain criteria and engage in various workshops, almost any faculty member could teach.

Whatever the specifics, it's clear that as a result of the new curriculum, more teachers and more students will be more involved with writing than ever before, and that will mean greater interest and greater demand for what the writing center can offer.

So here are some of the questions that need to be part of a

general education reform effort; if they're incorporated into that discussion, then the writing center's support role can be a persuasive feature of the plan itself, not to mention an integral factor in its daily success. The questions fall into two categories labeled "Practical Questions" and "Role Questions." Which ought to come first is a chicken-and-egg toss up; I've started with "Role Questions."

Role Questions really can be seen in two categories: role in relationship to students and role in relationship to faculty. Given a new curriculum and increased demand, what services or activities will define the writing center's relation to student writers? Will the writing center continue to focus on individual writer/reader conferences, or will it consider other options? For example, would the writing center be willing to offer two- or three-writer conferences focusing on the same assignment (thus dividing a class into small groups that meet in the writing center)? Does the writing center want to consider using writing fellows as direct links to particular courses (and what is meant by "direct links")? Would the writing center be willing and able to offer workshops on such things as "Revising the Essay" or "Reducing Passive Voice?"

Turning to faculty, what services or activities will define the writing center's relation to faculty who require writing in their courses? Will the writing center offer in-class workshops (i.e., teaching with the teacher, or teaching in place of the teacher)? Will it offer consultations regarding assignment development (in effect

treating faculty as writers of assignments)? Will the writing center play a part in faculty development workshops or seminars?

The practical questions are just as important. Is the writing center space large enough to handle increased demand, and is it adequately furnished? Is there a plan to recruit, train, and compensate a larger number of writing assistants? Will a new class need to be offered to help accomplish this training (if so, who will teach it)? Will new scheduling and appointment policies need to be devised, and will the hours of operation need to be extended? Are there plans to accurately inform faculty and students about the new writing center and what it does? For example, will the writing center offer any kind of e-mail or web site information? Finally, two crucially important questions: Has the writing center budget been adjusted to match its larger role? And has the writing center director's job description been revised in line with these new realities?

To all of these questions, I'd add just one more: Is there a plan to revisit these questions regularly?

All these questions imply possibilities for change in the writing center. And what unites them is the notion of partnership. Any effort to extend writing beyond English departments offers opportunities to extend the reach and usefulness of the writing center. In the best of all worlds, the writing center is a major

factor, extending its partnerships with students and with faculty in ever greater directions and ever greater numbers. The opportunities here are at once seductive and complicated; the promise is that a writing center lives up to its name.